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Bureaucrats and Watergate

As the ripples of Watergate widen, it becomes painfully obvious that not merely the White House staff became corrupted. The rot has penetrated deeply into the vast network of the federal bureaucracy.

We have known for some time that the FBI compromised itself by funneling reports of the Watergate investigations to the political operators in the White House.

The indictment of one former attorney general, the resignation of another and the persistent suggestions of negligence on the part of the federal team of prosecutors make it apparent that the Justice Department was no model of integrity, either.

Now we are told that Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson and Deputy Undersecretary William Macomber, both old-school-tie types, gave access to highly secret documents to the bandits of the Committee for the Re-election of the President.

And the CIA assisted in plans for the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist — perhaps with the authorization of Richard Helms, the ex-director, but surely with the concurrence of Gen. Robert Cushman, then the CIA's deputy director and now the commandant of the Marine Corps. This information reflects well on neither the CIA nor the Marines.

Conceivably, one can understand and even rationalize the conduct of H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, who have long known and served Richard Nixon, whose loyalty to Nixon superseded all others, whose station in life depended on Nixon's re-election.

But how does one explain the willingness of such distinguished professionals as Johnson and Macomber, Helms and Cushman, to acquiesce in these dirty little games?

I don't know the answer to that question — but I suspect it is one of the most serious raised by the Watergate affair. For if the whole bureaucracy can be infected by a few rogues in the White House, then we can have no confidence in our government and our national penchant for cynicism is justified.

I suspect part of the problem is that our country lacks the tradition of a strong, self-confident and esteemed civil service. We tend to denigrate our professionals as mere "bureaucrats." The President himself periodically threatens and fumes at the bureaucrats. The secretary of state regularly casts aspersions on the members of his own department.

In England and France and Japan, countries where the civil service tradition is solid, professional functionaries have a sense of themselves and of their responsibilities. Governments may come and go — but they stay on to serve the state. Their duty is to continuity, not to fleeting opportunism.

Ideally, this ought to mean that our bureaucracy is more flexible than others, able to adapt to political shifts and social changes. But I don't think that's the case. I suspect our bureaucracy simply has less commitment to ongoing responsibilities — and more vulnerability to the whims and weaknesses of whoever comes along to exercise power.

That's why it's so important that the President set a tone of unwavering integrity. The President establishes the moral atmosphere in which the White House staff functions. He also sends out the signals by which the bureaucracy operates.

But the signals the bureaucracy has received from Richard Nixon are the firing of Ernest Fitzgerald and the attempted firing of Gordon Rule for exposing waste at the Pentagon, a massive shakeup in the Bureau of Labor Statistics because Nixon didn't like publication of unfavorable statistics, a replacement of competent secretaries of commerce and interior with new men more suitable to campaign contributors.

Nixon, unmistakably, has been saying that what the administration requires is not nonpartisan dedication to the nation but unswerving loyalty to its own political well-being.

So when John Ehrlichman calls the CIA and says the President wants the agency to bend the law and help in the Ellsberg investigation, Helms may dislike the order, but doesn't challenge it.

Actually, maybe the President never told Ehrlichman to phone. But that's not the key issue. The President established the ground rules by which this administration has operated. And the CIA officials, no less than Ehrlichman, simply carried them out.

What Watergate is telling us, then, is that the Nixon legacy is the suborning of the federal establishment. And I doubt that Nixon, in the remaining years, has the means — or the will — to undo that legacy.

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